The King of the Forest

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The King of the Forest

by 1Friendly_alien

Summary

> “My name is Hannibal Lecter, you may have heard of me as the King of the forest.”
> Will was so awestruck he didn’t try to stop his eyes from wandering over the man’s naked skin. He let his dog jump back to the ground and Winston started circling the newly emerged man, seeming equally distrustful of him as he’d been of the stag.
>
> A tale of a magical bond, of deception, betrayal and something else.

Notes

> Thank you for giving this dark fairy tale a chance! Welcome to the forest and enjoy your stay!

See the end of the work for more notes

The King of the Forest

Once upon a time in a kingdom far, far away lived a samodiva, who married a fisherman. He'd stolen her veil and she was forced to be his bride and live as a human woman, unless she could take it back.

Soon the samodiva was with a child – a boy, who she named Will.

Will Graham was a baby like any other, but his mother could no more understand him than she could her human husband. Whenever the baby would cry, she was confused, and she would leave the room.

Soon the young mother got overwhelmed. She was tied to the family by her veil, so she had no way of leaving, but she was determined to fix whatever was wrong with her baby.

The samodiva took her son to an old hag, known throughout the land for having a solution to every problem.

"There's nothing wrong with your baby," The hag spat out after she'd looked the little boy over. She'd been hoping to find some incurable illness that she could offer to heal in exchange for the mother's soul.

The samodiva wouldn't give in, however.

"Fine." The hag gritted through her crooked teeth. "Leave your child with me tonight and tomorrow you'll take it home as quiet as a mouse."

The hag took the baby deep into the woods. Right in the centre of the forest, there was a lake with a perfectly round shape around which the samodivi liked to dance hand in hand when the moon was full. The locals called it "the Eye of the forest".

Once she reached it, the old hag knelt on its banks and took out the baby from inside her basket. "Let's see how your vila mother likes you when you're as cold and quiet as a river stone." She whispered and made to drop the baby in the water.

Before she could let go, the hag choked on a warm, thick liquid and when she looked down she saw that her heart was missing.

The baby roused up at her scream and started crying. It only calmed down, once it was taken into the strong arms of its saviour.

Will stared into an unfamiliar face with sharp features that looked nothing like his mother's but had the same powerful calming presence as the samodiva. Will was looking at the King of the forest.

The deity held the baby carefully in one arm and cupped a little water from the lake with the other. “Your mother’s lost her ability to see through magic, so you’ll have to look out for yourself,” The King of the forest told Will and started gently smearing the water over the baby’s forehead and then over his eyelids. “The next time a witch tries to drown you, you’ll see her true face.”

Many years later, Will’s father passed away and his mother left, finally free to return to the forest. Will never saw her again. In fact, although his samodiva blood gave him the ability to do so, it would be a long time before Will saw another samodiva again.

When the local clerics learnt of Will’s ability to see all magical creatures they started using him to solve all manner of unexplained misfortunes that had befallen the population.

Sometimes Will would point out a Kikimora, who’d been terrorizing a new bride in her home by sabotaging her work. Sometimes he had to face far darker monsters.

Eventually, his gift estranged him from the town’s people and the young man took to living in a cabin near the edge of the forest, where no other person would dare to build their home.

One day Will saw the town’s chief hunter, Jared Jacob Hobbs return from the forest alongside his daughter Abigail. The girl held in her arms a young doe with a snow-white hide and Will immediately understood that the slain creature was divine.

Dread settled over Will, but he told himself that whatever the hunter had sown, so he would reap and went back into the cabin.

When night fell Will heard heavy footsteps walk past his home. He looked out his small bedroom window and saw a giant black stag with antlers sharp as stakes pass right by him.

Before he could stop him, Will’s dog Winston ran out of the slightly opened back door and started running straight towards the massive creature. Protectiveness made Will follow his dog outside and face the stag in his thin nightclothes and with no sort of weapon.

As the stag started lowering his crown of knives towards the growling dog, Will’s voice boomed through the night: “Don’t hurt him!” What had been intended as a plea, had come out as a command.

The powerful being stopped and looked at Will with interest.

“He didn’t know any better,” Will demanded, while he still had the stag’s attention.

The forest creature nodded its head almost imperceptibly and then without warning it spoke. “I see. And would you say the same of the man, who slew my sister? Would you have me spare him as well?”

Will thought about it, but found no pity in his heart for the hunter. “Do what you must to Jared Jacob Hobbs. Knowing him, he would be thrilled to be killed by you. Makes him seem… important.”

The stag nodded its heavy head again and then started lowering it. Will took that to mean the stag was attacking and quickly drew back, grabbing Winston in his arms. Instead of charging, when the stag’s huge antlers touched the ground, it morphed into a man, wrapped in the animal’s black hide.

“My name is Hannibal Lecter, you may have heard of me as the King of the forest.”

Will was so awestruck he didn’t try to stop his eyes from wandering over the man’s naked skin. He let his dog jump back to the ground and Winston started circling the newly emerged man, seeming equally distrustful of him as he’d been of the stag.

“Will Graham” he made his own introductions when he got back his wits about him.

“And do you know where this Jared Jacob Hobbs lives, Will?” asked the man, who still held a pair of dangerous antlers in his hands.

Will nodded mutely.

“Then lead the way,” The King of the forest ordered.

Before Will obeyed, he made sure to grab his coat, his bow and arrows. Hannibal said nothing, but seemed pleased with that for some reason.

Will had seen the Hobbs’ house only one or two times. It was an unremarkable wooden cabin, much like his own. The way both differed was that Will had never once had a woman with a slit throat drowning in blood on his doorsteps.

Forgetting all about Hannibal, Will threw himself towards her. Before he could even kneel beside her, she made a few more pained sounds and stopped breathing. There were sounds of a struggle from inside the cabin and Will immediately knew who it was - Abigail, Hobbs’s daughter, the same daughter that had carried the snow-white doe in her arms this morning.

“Hannibal!” Will shouted to the deity, who now watched him from the edge of the woods unmoved by the gore. “Hannibal, she needs help! Take her father’s life, kill him for what he did to your sister!”

Will’d expected any number of reactions – righteous anger, grief, what he hadn’t expected to see on the man’s face was a smile. “No, Will, that would make him seem too important.” The deity said with all the calmness in the world.

Will felt rage take over him. He turned his back to the King of the forest and kicked open the door to the cabin. He took in the sight of Jared Jacob Hobbs holding a carving knife to his daughter’s throat. Without thinking, Will grabbed the hunting bow, hanging from his back.

The moment he had a clear shot of the man, Will released the arrow and the hunter went down, but only after he had managed to land a cut on his daughter's neck.

Will caught her before she fell. "No, no, no." He started whispering. Abigail Hobbs was staring at him with her wide pale eyes and Will shaking hands could do nothing to stop her bleeding.

"See?" Jared Jacob Hobbs asked him from where he had fallen, a mad glee in his eyes. Before he succumbed to his wound he laid one last loving look at the white hide sprawled across his table and then one at his daughter.

Will looked at Abigail as well and whimpered helplessly at the blood gushing from her neck. She was starting to lose consciousness.

Then at once, Will's hand was gently removed from Abigail and another, confident and purposeful, replaced it.

There was no need to see who it was, but Will raised his head anyway. His eyes met a pair of maroon ones. Will could do nothing but stare at the forest deity as he raised Abigail's head and started speaking in a language no human could understand.

The King of the forest looked beautiful in his power. Will found himself needing to touch, to be closer to the flow of magic that felt somehow familiar to him. He placed his hand over the deity's where it laid on Abigail's neck. Hannibal looked up from his task and caught Will's eyes again.

"I can save her life," he spoke calmly, "but since she can't pay herself, you'll have to."

Will didn't have time to hesitate. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"Though her body lies here, her soul has already taken three steps into the realm of death," the deity began. "For each step, I bring her into this world I want one thing from you. Do you understand?"

And Will understood just fine. He nodded. "Bring her back, and I'll pay your price."

"For this step, I want your silence," the deity said. "You'll never tell anybody that you met the King of the forest or that I can take human form. Swear it."

"I swear it," Will replied frantically staring at the girl, who for all the world appeared dead.

Hannibal started chanting again. The bleeding stopped, but Abigail was still unmoving.

"For this second step, I want a place at your table. You'll never send me away when I come to you. Swear it," the deity ordered patiently.

"You'll always have a place at my table, I give you my word."

After another string of incantations, the colour returned to Abigail's face. Will stared at it and said a silent prayer for her soul.

“The last step she takes back into the land of the living is the hardest. Even I cannot give life freely.” the King of the forest spoke. “If she lives, another must take her place.”

“You want my life?” Will asked confused. Why would the deity ask for all the other things if he’d been planning to reap Will’s life anyway?

“Not yours,” The King of the forest smiled and Will noticed his canine teeth were sharper than a human’s. “One day not far from now, I’ll point at a human and ask you to kill them. If you choose to disobey or resist, I’ll be able to compel you to go through with it anyway.”

Will’s throat clenched in anger. This was too much. It was one thing to give his soul away, but to take an innocent's life? Could he even do that?

“She doesn’t have much time, Will,” Hannibal told him and still his voice didn’t sound unkind or impatient.

“I’ll do it.” Will gritted through his teeth. He shut out the faces of all the people he knew. He refused to think of them dead at his hands. He wouldn’t let it come to that, he would die before he’d let it happen, but first, he needed to save Abigail’s life. “I’ll take the life of one person that you point at, but first bring her back.”

The deity nodded and just like that Abigail started breathing again.

Under the dried blood, there was not a scratch on her and the girl relaxed and fell asleep right into the arms of the creature, whose precious sister she had lured to her death.

When that realization dawned on him, Will searched Hannibal’s expression for any sign of anger. Then when the King brushed away a curl of Abigail's hair and lifted the sleeping girl in his arms, Will realized that they were both safe with the deity. For now.

The King of the Forest

A week of prayer and repentance and the Good Lord had forgiven Will for murdering another human being in cold blood, or so Father Crawford said. Not only that, the young man had been made into a hero.

Will hadn't felt less heroic in his life. He couldn't bring himself to tell Jack that the King of the forest had been there that night. The priest had a hard enough time spinning tales about the vengeful spirit of the snow-white doe possessing Hobbs to murder his wife and attempt to do the same to his daughter, or so Will told himself.

After searching through the house Father Crawford and his helpers had found the remains of another of Hobbs's victims – Cassie Boyle. She had been mounted naked on a set of stag antlers. What conclusions Will drew about that, he kept to himself.

The very next day Abigail moved into Will's cabin. At first, he'd worried about feeding another mouth, but it turned out he needn't have: every day, three times a day two full plates would appear on the table.

It was no mystery where they were coming from and Will always had to conceal a shiver when he felt the echo of Hannibal's magic in the air. Sometimes, very rarely there was no such echo and Will suspected the deity had delivered the food himself.

The meals were never the same, and they smelt mouthwateringly good, but Will resisted eating any, giving his portion to Winston instead.

Abigail had no such reservations. "You should eat. It's really good, and it would be rude not to," she said one day, chewing a piece of her juicy steak.

"Rude." Will chuckled. "I'd almost feel bad if there weren't every possibility that he's feeding us, roasted orphans. He's a monster, Abigail, you can't forget that."

"I know what he is. I also knew what my father was." Abigail answered, her tone unchanged. "I'm just saying: you should take what he gives you and watch out for the moment he turns on you. Then - you run."

Will had no desire to argue, but he knew Abigail was wrong. He couldn't let himself depend on Hannibal, no matter how alluring the King of the forest was. It was not lost on Will just how easily Hannibal had come to fill the role of the cruel, but generous father in Abigail's life. It was still rather jarring that his adopted daughter had also drawn an equivalent between Will and her mother. Furthermore, it was very likely that Abigail was now giving him the same advice that she'd received from Louis Hobbs a thousand times before.

Whether history was bound to repeat or not, Will refused to end up lying in his own blood, while Hannibal tore into their daughter with a carving knife.

Still, having a delicious warm meal every day couldn't hurt, could it?

♟

After a week of Will trying and failing to catch Hannibal in the act of setting the table, the man had finally had enough.

He didn't go to sleep at all, waiting in the kitchen instead. When early in the morning the door opened to reveal Hannibal with a food basket in his hands, Will almost shot out of the chair.

"Good morning, Will." The deity greeted, not surprised to see him, almost as if he'd let himself be caught. "Did you sleep well?"

Will was so dumbstruck, he just stared as Hannibal washed his hands and started dividing his cooking into two beautiful portions.

After he was done, Hannibal picked up his basket and turned to leave.

Will felt anger build up inside him. Was that all?

"You're leaving? What about Abigail? You can't just come and go with the wind. She needs you. One would think you'd keep a closer eye on her after what happened to your last charge." The words kept tumbling out of Will's mouth before he could stop them.

As with his last attempt to mention the loss of his sister to get a rise out of Hannibal, this seemed to hit a wall.

"You have been quite entertaining, Will, but this form is limiting, and I don't wish to stay in it much longer. I will be watching over Abigail, but now I need to go. Today I'll burn Misha's hide, so she may be reborn into the next life. Then I need to go hunting."

When he saw that Will would remain silent, Hannibal said: "Goodbye, Will," and then left.

♕

Will knew he couldn't leave things as they were. The moment he'd made the deal with Hannibal to give Abigail her life back, he'd sworn to himself that he would find a way to avoid paying the price. He'd killed before, it was true, but never a human. Not before Jared Jacob Hobbs at least.

He needed to find some way to control Hannibal, so the deity wouldn't be able to bid or compel Will to take another's life away.

There was only one being that Will could hope to get that kind of power from. The samodivi were said to be masters of the great elks. If the tales were true, there was only one samodiva left in this parts of the kingdom. Will was certain it was no coincidence that they called her the Queen of the Forest.

At noon, when the shadows were shortest, Will made his way to the Eye of the forest. The lake was as tranquil as ever, and the sun bathed in its waters.

Will washed his eyes with its coolness and then took a deep breath before speaking: “Queen of the forest, I humbly ask to speak to you. Please, grant me an audience or let me leave here unharmed.”

“You should be more careful with your wording, human,” A serene female voice answered. “What if I decide to grant you your audience and then drown you in my lake?”

Will kept his eyes shut, fighting the need to look upon the legendary samodivska beauty.

“I was hoping that the chance to mock my thoughtlessness would be too appealing for you to ignore,” he answered, aiming to speak in the general direction of where he thought the samodiva was.

“I see you’re quick to abandon all pretend at politeness.”

“I apologize,” Will replied and smiled slightly at the Queen’s displeasure. “My name is Will Graham, I am the son of one of your sisters. What should I call you?“

There was a moment of silence and Will knew the samodiva was trying to recognize in him his mother’s features. He allowed himself to open his eyes, but stared at the ground. He startled when he saw there right next to him two bare feet. The samodiva had been silent as a shadow in her approach.

“My name is Bedelia de Maurie and you may not use it,” came the response finally.

“Bedelia is a very beautiful name, Bedelia,” Will said, now full-on grinning. He saw in his peripheral vision a thin white hand being raised to strike him. “I am here because I know you helped Jared Jacob Hobbs kill Misha Lecter.”

The hand froze and Bedelia’s feet retreated. “I did no such thing.” She certainly sounded taken aback by the accusation, but hardly scared. Will had been shooting in the dark, but he was now getting a little desperate and needed to see this through.

“I think you did.” Will doubled down. “I don’t know why. Whether you just wanted her dead or you wanted to take your revenge on Hannibal, but you distracted him long enough to give the bait an opening. If you don’t want Lecter to find out about this, you will help me.”

There was nothing but an amused puff of air in response at first. Then the samodiva said: “If you knew Hannibal as I do, you would have realized that he’s well aware of the part I played in his sister’s death.” Will wanted to interrupt, but Bedelia didn’t let him. “I am sure that he already plans to kill me for it. This is the reason, amongst others, why I’m willing to give you the answer you seek.”

"So," Bedelia leaned closer and whispered in Will's ear. "Ask."

Will obeyed her: "How do I bind Hannibal Lecter?"

"Before I answer I want you to look at me," Bedelia returned, "If you're going to conquer Hannibal's will you have to be able to withstand my gaze."

Will let his eyes travel from the samodiva's bare feet, alongside her white robe and waves of blond hair and finally to her sculptured face. Looking into Bedelia's eyes was intense. It gave Will the urge to hunch his shoulders and lower his head, but he stood his ground.

Finally, the samodiva was satisfied. "Good," she said. "Now, you don't have much time, so listen carefully. There's only one way to bind Hannibal - you have to take away the source of his power. Steal his antlers while he is in human form and hide them, where he would never find them without your help. This way he wouldn't be able to transform, and he'd be in your service."

Will's pulse started to quicken. His father had loved telling him the story of how he'd stolen his mother's veil, but all Will remembered from it was the rage on his mother's face, whenever she'd walk in on him telling it. "Where can I find his antlers?" He asked almost as an afterthought.

"Head east, not very far from here, there's a great oak tree. Hannibal hides his antlers there, while he hunts." Bedelia said.

"Thank you." Will sighed in relief.

Bedelia gave him one last hard look before turning around. "Good luck, Will Graham. I hope you succeed. For both our sakes."

♚

Will couldn't take any chances. There was no telling when Hannibal had finished burning Misha's hide and how long it would take him to hunt.

The young man ran eastwards, keeping an eye out for an oak tree. It turned out the tree wasn't something one could miss. It had to be at least a few centuries old. Its crown threw a shadow the size of a small cottage and three grown men wouldn't be able to encircle it with joined arms. There was no doubt that the oak tree was both ancient and powerful.

After circling it trice, Will spotted a burrow not far from the lowest of the tree's branches. He'd never been a good climber, but Will rolled up his sleeves and started up the massive trunk.

He caught the branch nearest to the burrow and hung from it to look inside. When he did, Will almost lost his grip. The dismembered head of Jared Jacob Hobbs was staring at him.

Thump, thump, thump.

"Are you looking for something, Will?" Hannibal's voice travelled to him and even without looking Will could tell the deity was back to his elk form. "You should know better than to cahoot with Bedelia, Will. Do you think me that easy to tame? Did you think I would leave my weak spot open so soon after doing so cost the life of the only one I cared about?"

Will jumped back to the ground, then got up with no small amount of effort. The black stag towered over him and Will's spine tingled with the fear of being crushed.

“I suggest you run, Will,” Hannibal spoke in a low voice.

Will decided he was done with rushing through the woods for one day. If he was going to die, he might as well annoy the deity on his way out. “I don’t think so,” He answered. “I want to see what you’ll do if I stay right here.”

The deity's gaze bore into Will, then Hannibal seemed to come to a decision. In a blink of an eye, the elk turned into a man, wrapped in his black hide and holding his antlers in one hand. He laid them on the ground and started approaching Will very slowly.

"I am a benevolent god, Will, but I don't abide rudeness," Hannibal said, backing Will against the tree. "If you ever try to steal from me again,"

"You will do what?" Will challenged, a dangerous thrill rushing through him.

Hannibal breathed a gush of air out his nostrils and Will was sure he’d seen them widen. The deity leaned in against Will, pressing their bodies together. The only thing between Will and Hannibal’s naked body was the deity’s hide covering his hips and some of his chest.

Hannibal leaned all the way in and whispered in Will’s ear:

"If you ever try to steal my antlers again, you better hope you succeed, because otherwise, I will kill you."

When Hannibal pulled away, he went straight for his antlers and didn't look back, as he transformed.

Will could only be glad for that since he didn't think he would be able to hide how painfully hard he was.

The Wolf Trap

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No matter how alone one thinks they are, there might always be a fly watching. Or as it was in this tale, a young red-haired woman, hiding behind a tree.

Will Graham wasn't the only person descended from a creature of magic. Sometime after all but one samodiva had left the forest, a rusalka took a human lover and had a daughter with him. She called the child Freddie.

The rusalka had passed to her offspring her luscious red hair and taste for causing mischief.

What's more, thanks to her mixed blood, Freddie Lounds could see some of the more powerful creatures that roamed the forest.

And that included its King. Soon a carefully placed rumour snowballed into widespread outrage and panic. Will Graham had been seen conspiring closely with the King of the forest.

Nightmares plagued Will's sleep. He'd failed to capture Hannibal, which meant that at some point he'll have to pay the price for Abigail taking that final step into the land of the living. He saw himself in his dreams, covered in blood, surrounded by the corpses of everyone he'd ever known.

"You really are something, Will," dream Hannibal told him while stroking his cheek. "There was no need for all of this, all I asked for was one life."

Will saw himself melting into Hannibal's touch, closing his eyes to all the death he'd caused.

"You couldn't help it," the deity continued soothingly. "It was always in your nature."

In the morning, when an exhausted Will entered the classroom, it was empty. He told himself he should be thankful they hadn't yet put him on a trial for Satanism. Jack Crawford surely had something to do with that. As if summoned the bishop appeared.

"I see class is out for today." The priest stated and as always his voice was a bit too commanding to suit the part of the humble servant of God.

"Who would put their child in a room with a devil worshipper?" Will smiled bitterly.

Jack remained solemn. "I want you to tell me if what I've heard is true. I wanted to hear it from you because you're an old friend of the church and I trust you would not lie to me."

Will understood the true meaning behind those words. Jack was putting all the church's authority behind Will. Were it not for that, he would have been hanged in the square before dawn.

Will told Jack everything: about the night he'd killed Jared Jacob Hobbs, even about how the King of the forest was providing food for him and Abigail. But Will's shame was too great to admit the attraction he felt towards the deity, and so he kept that out of his confessions.

With every word, the bishop's face turned to stone. When Will was done, Jack gripped his shoulder hard and told him in a low voice: "All that you've told me, speak of it to nobody. You were alone when you killed Jared Jacob Hobbs. You never met that abomination in the forest. You and Abigail Hobbs have turned down every single temptation the Devil has offered you."

"SAY IT!" Jack shouted, apparently unsatisfied with Will's nod.

"I was alone when I killed Jared Jacob Hobbs. I never met that-" Will's words caught in his throat, but he pushed through it. "- abomination in the forest. Abigail and I have turned down every temptation the Devil has offered us."

The last sentence caused goosebumps to rise on Will's skin, but he willed himself to remain strong. If he failed Jack's examination, he would hang.

After what had felt like a century, priest Crawford finally let go of Will. "Good. I don't want to hear about this ever again. We have important work to do, dark creatures to hunt. I don't have time to be searching for witches amongst my own."

A stone fell off of Will's chest. The danger had passed. Trouble was that beneath that stone had been a swamp of stinking clogged up guilt. Will was surprised that the bishop couldn't smell it, but maybe it was more convenient for him to ignore it.

"There's someone I want you to meet," Jack spoke again, and without explaining any further, led Will out of the school. Outside stood a man with ash brown hair and maroon eyes, smartly dressed and with a healer's bag hanging from his shoulder.

"Will, this is the new town doctor – Dr Hannibal Lecter." Jack introduced the man.

Will flinched back as if hit. His eyes met Hannibal's for just a second before he tore them away. He stared at Jack's back instead. How could the man not see? The air was practically on fire around Hannibal and his shadow was not that of a human. Not only was it tall as a tree, despite it being early in the morning, but it also had antlers with ends that looked as sharp as daggers.

Jack looked at him expectantly, so Will spat out his name and looked at Hannibal with growing anger. "Not fond of eye contact, I see." Said the deity, posing as a man.

"Eyes are distracting." Will snapped back. "You see too much, you don't see enough. And- And it's hard to focus when you're thinking, um, "Oh, those whites are really white", or, "He must have some disease", or, "Oh, were those goat eyes?" So, yes, I try to avoid eyes

whenever possible.“ At that point, Will knew he was rambling, so he looked at the priest. “Jack?”

The bishop seemed a bit puzzled, but Will could see with the corner of his eyes ‘Dr Hannibal Lecter’ was smiling. “Dr Lecter, you’ll have to excuse Will. He’s an excellent teacher and of great service to the church, but not the most sociable man.” Jack explained clapping Will familiarly on the back.

Will did not miss how Hannibal followed the gesture with his eyes. “I have to go now, but I hope to see you at church on Sabbath.”

“I’m afraid not,” Hannibal answered. “I’m not orthodox.”

Will let out a small laugh at that and Jack gave him a stern look. “The church’s door is open for you, if you change your mind, doctor.” The bishop said before he departed. Will was not surprised at his easy acceptance of an outsider’s beliefs. He had always suspected Jack had become a member of the clergy as a way to root out evil more than out of sincere faith in God.

Yet even Jack would have been appalled if he’d known he’d been in the presence of a pagan god.

When Jack was out of sight, Will grabbed Hannibal by the arm and led him inside the school. “What are you doing here?” Will demanded, locking the door behind him and finally meeting Hannibal’s eyes.

“It’s good to see you too, Will,” Hannibal replied calmly. “If you’re asking why I took the position in town, I’d rather hope you can figure that out for yourself when the time comes.”

“Is it because of Freddie Lounds?” Will hadn’t considered that the rumours of their meeting might have reached Hannibal in his forest-dwelling.

“To an extent,” The deity confirmed. “Miss Lounds has been very rude and that simply won’t do. I want to know if she’s seen my face in this form and if yes, deal with her accordingly.”

As much as he disliked the town gossip, Will shuddered to think what would become of her, if she recognized Hannibal as a human. Outwardly he only narrowed his eyes.

“Do you even know how to be a doctor?” he asked.

For a second the look on Hannibal’s face was that of pure offence, then his composure was back. “Before I came to this forest, I’ve had many names and many occupations. Physician happens to be the one I’ve practised the most.”

Will couldn’t help the burning curiosity that lit inside him. How old was Hannibal? How many kingdoms had he seen rise and fall in his lifetime? Had he lived before civilization? Before humanity, even?

“I feel you have many more questions for me, Will,” Hannibal spoke, leaning on Will’s desk. “I might have some answers for you.”

“When you saved Abigail you said you never did anything without a price,” Will challenged. “What are these answers going to cost me?”

Hannibal’s lips twitched in a smile. “No more than you’ve already forfeited,” He answered. “Consider them a gift for a deal well struck.”

That was the final straw for Will. He walked right up to, where Hannibal was leaning on his desk. When they were close enough to touch, he grabbed his books from beside the man. “Keep your gifts,” Will said, then turned around to leave. As he was unlocking the door Will could feel Hannibal’s burning gaze on him. He let himself get one last look at the deity.

There was something different in the way Hannibal was looking at him, almost as if he was searching for something deep within Will. 'To an extent,' The deity had said, but what more could be of interest in this small town to an ancient being like Hannibal? Why had he chosen this exact forest to settle?

As with all his other questions, Will refused to give in and ask. He broke eye contact and walked out the door.

That night no dinner appeared on the table and all Will had to offer Abigail were boiled eggs he’d traded for last week. She ate her share dutifully, but Will could feel she was angry.

Finally, when he said nothing, Abigail set her fork down a bit louder than was necessary.

“What did you say to him?” She wanted to know. “I do hope, you haven’t lost us his protection, because if you have…” She trailed off and only then did Will understand that she wasn’t angry. She was scared.

“Abigail, we don’t need his protection. We can’t put our faith in a monster. I’ll keep you safe myself.” Will tried to reassure her.

Abigail pursed her lips and looked down at the cracked eggshells on her plate. “You’re sweet Will, but I’ve heard this before, and it won’t end as you think it will.”

It was a full moon and Will’s room was too bright for him to fall asleep.

He didn’t have blinds, nor even glass, just two wooden flaps on his window that he felt if he were to close, he would boil alive. He had thrown all the blankets off his bed and was thinking he might be running a fever.

After hours of tossing and turning, Will finally fell into a shallow sleep. But even then in the moonlit night, there was something calling to him. His whole body was aching with yearning and his limbs twitched with the need to get moving.

Gradually, Will gave in to the pull until it had him. Without waking, he stood up and walked out of his bedroom, past Abigail’s door and towards the one in the kitchen. Once outside, he

headed straight towards the heart of the forest.

Somewhere along the way, Will began to become aware of his surroundings. He was cold, and he'd step barefoot on more than one branch, so his feet were aching as well. Before he could become fully conscious Will ran into something massive, unyielding, but also soft and warm. He let his head rest there and tried rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"How long has it been since you took a proper rest, Will?" a deep, accented voice asked.

Will couldn't remember, so he didn't answer and just buried his face deeper into the gentle fur.

"I'm guessing you have no idea how to go back, do you?" Hannibal stated more than asked.

Although Will could not see, the elk's eyes softened. He nosed at Will's bed tousled hair. "Will," The King of the forest spoke quietly and gently. "You're going to get on my back, and I'm going to carry you home. You must hold on tightly, or else you might fall and hurt yourself. Do you understand?"

Will nodded once. Even in his half-conscious state, he realized the deity had never spoken so gently before.

"Good", Hannibal said and gracefully crouched down. Will's own movements were clumsy, and he was still half asleep, but he somehow managed to get up on the elk's back and get a hold of the fur near the deity's neck.

"Is this alright?" Will managed. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, you aren't. Hold on as tightly as you are able, Will." Came Hannibal's response. "If at any moment you feel your grip slipping, take hold of my antlers."

That gave Will pause. Not long ago, Hannibal had threatened to murder Will if he tried stealing those antlers. Though in all fairness, they were now firmly attached to the elk's head and Will doubted he could take them away with very much stealth.

Will let his hands slowly travel from the deity's neck towards his head. Hannibal was still standing in place, so Will had no excuse to lay a hand on his antlers. Still, once he did, Will found that Hannibal allowed it. Only after the man had a firm hold on the antlers, did Hannibal begin to move.

Will was surprised to find that they weren't made of just bare bone but covered in soft velvet. He ran his hands over them, and it felt incredibly good.

Soon Will's mind drifted towards the only other time he had seen elk antlers from this up close.

"Hannibal," Will broke the silence. "Did you kill Cassie Boyle?"

At this point Will knew better than to expect anger, so he just waited to see whether Hannibal would lie to him.

“Yes, I did,” Hannibal answered. “Does that change anything?” Will thought about that.

“No, I guess it doesn’t.” It didn’t change Will’s attraction towards Hannibal or the sense of shared responsibility for Abigail.

“How did you figure it out?” Hannibal asked after a while.

Will sighed and absent-mindedly stroked his thumb over the sharpest part of the antlers within reach. When his thumb started bleeding Will drew away. “Impaling her like that was both rather crude and obvious if I’m honest”

“Not my best work.” Hannibal agreed.

“Beyond that,” Will continued unprompted. “The whole thing didn’t fit with the understanding I had of Jared Jacob Hobbs. He would never disrespect one of his hunting trophies like that. He would have utilized every part of her.”

Hannibal’s silence was his only response, but Will felt that the deity was pleased.

“That still leaves the question of why you did it.” Will was getting a little dizzy, from staring so near in front of him, so he tried focusing on the dark forest around them.

“How do you think you would have looked, Will, if you’d told the story of what happened in Abigail’s old home and there wasn’t the added fact of a girl’s mutilated body in Hobbs' basement?” Hannibal inquired, then before Will said anything he answered for him. “An unstable recluse, who’d finally snapped and killed a girl’s entire family just so he could take her away and then scare her into supporting his story.”

Will couldn't find it in himself to deny it. As grusome as Cassie Boyle's death had been, it had probably saved his life.

Soon they were in front of Will’s cabin. Hannibal came to a stop, allowing Will to jump down from his back. Then to the man’s surprise, the deity transformed into a human.

At Will’s questioning stare, he replied: “I got you this far, I insist I be allowed to see you safely inside.”

It was confusing, this sudden tenderness the King of the forest was showing. Will stared at him and the deity seemed suddenly very distant. Will's eyes tried to adjust to the sudden brightness. He reasoned that now that they were out of the forest, the moon's light was unobstructed. Suddenly Will realized not only did Hannibal look very far away, but there was also what appeared to be an iron gate between them. It was old, ancient even and it was barely hanging on its hinges.

Hannibal looked beautiful in the moonlight. His hair looked like spun silver and his skin like marble. Will had never fully grasped his divinity, not even when Hannibal was a towering elk, not until this very moment.

Will realized it hadn't been the forest that had been calling to him, pulling him out of bed. It had been Hannibal. Even now Will felt an irresistible pull towards the deity. His feet carried

him towards Hannibal. Will paused for a second before the iron gate, but it was a small thing to overlook, so he passed through it.

When he reached him, Will drank in Hannibal's beauty with his eyes. He wasn't sure he could speak, but he had to try.

“Stay with us tonight.” He tried not to sound like he was pleading. “Abigail needs someone to talk to that’s not me.”

Hannibal watched him wordlessly and Will became acutely aware of how few clothes they were wearing between them.

“Not tonight, Will.” The deity answered and there was what sounded like genuine regret in his tone. Slowly he raised a hand to Will's face and stroked his cheek with his thumb. If Will weren't so intranced he might have startled or flinched away, but instead he sighed into the touch and allowed it to warm him.

"I waited so long for you," Hannibal said softly and it was this that finally made Will come to his senses. He stumbled back and the moment he was out of Hannibal's orbit he turned tail and ran.

In the morning Will was mortified with himself.

There were many stories of people, who’d encountered a samodiva and made the mistake of looking into her eyes. The fools would then fall madly in love, unable to sustain themselves in any way, only interested in mindlessly chasing after their enchantress.

Those tales had been exactly the reason Will had been so reluctant to meet Bedelia’s eyes. And yet once he had, all he had felt was intimidation.

There were no stories of people being enthralled by the samodivi’s familiars - the great grey elks. Maybe Hannibal was different. His fur was black and not grey, so maybe he was an entirely different kind of creature. That would certainly explain his complicated relationship with Bedelia and his divine status, which grey elks decidedly did not possess.

“Was he here last night?” Abigail asked during breakfast. “I thought I heard his voice.”

Will evaded answering, by taking a sip of his scorching hot herb tea. When his tongue didn’t fall off, he was forced to reply: “He probably came by to check if you were doing alright.”

Abigail didn’t press further, but Will knew that wasn’t the end of that particular conversation.

The topic was brought up the very next morning. “I saw him last night.” Abigail stated in place of a ‘good morning’. “He was circling the house. Do you think he senses we are in danger?”

Will had been about to dismiss Hannibal’s repeat late-night visit as the whim of a bored deity, but Abigail’s last sentence made him reconsider. “Abigail, what do you mean we’re in

danger?"

"The brother of Cassie Boyle, Nick, I saw him lurking around," Abigail confessed, avoiding Will's eyes.

Finally, Abigail's fear made sense. She'd been scared that if Will offended him, Hannibal wouldn't be there to defend her.

Will, however, knew something Abigail didn't. He had a way of ensuring Hannibal would never leave Abigail unprotected. A way of 'conquering his will' as Bedelia had put it. Then Will wouldn't need to rely on Hannibal's benevolence, generosity or mercy. But to achieve that Will first had to take a huge risk and hope it would pay off.

When the sun started setting, Will told Abigail, a bit louder than it was strictly necessary, that he wasn't going to be back for a while, and she should probably eat without him. Will knew the immediate area around his cabin well enough to judge where to conceal himself from even the sharpest of eyes. When he was sufficiently hidden he just quieted down and waited.

Nick Boyle didn't turn out to be as bold as Will had anticipated. He only came out of hiding about an hour after Will had 'left'.

The black elk appeared right about the time the confrontation between Abigail and Nick Boyle was starting to heat up. Hannibal morphed into a human and just sat there, listening in at the door.

Once the noise from inside reached its peak and then suddenly ceased, Hannibal turned around and looked right at Will's hiding place.

Will's blood froze. He thought he'd been spotted, but after a moment Hannibal looked away and went inside.

As fast as a rabbit, Will jumped out and grabbed the antlers. He took them and ran. Will and didn't stop before he reached the village's small church. He checked to make sure there was nobody around before unlocking the church doors and going inside.

Will made his way through the narrow rows and as he sat in front of the church alter he could finally take a breath. This was consecrated ground, and he was sure the King of the forest couldn't enter. There was no other explanation as to why Hannibal would risk his cover by not attending church on Sunday.

Once Will had got his breathing under control, he stood up and hid the antlers behind the altar.

There was light coming from the window when Will came back.

For the first time in his life, Will was scared to go into his own home. He laid a hand over his heart willing it to quiet down, as he pushed the door open.

The scene that greeted him was almost out of a children's picture book: the house shone with cleanliness, the table was set with three chairs around it. Two of those were already taken. Abigail smiled at him and Will hadn't ever seen her this happy. Hannibal, who sat across her, also looked to be in a good mood.

"Welcome home, Will," the captured deity said. As he took his place between the two of them, Will felt at peace for the first time in a very long while.

That night after Abigail had retired to her room, Hannibal let Will press him up against the wall and bury his face in the crook of his neck.

"Do you have to do everything I tell you to?" Will needed to know, that this wasn't all him, that Hannibal wanted it too.

"I can refuse anything but a direct order from you" Hannibal explained calmly. "As long as you have my antlers, I am yours to command."

Will was so aroused he felt like he was losing his mind. He grabbed the back of the deity's neck and looked straight into his eyes.

"Hannibal Lecter, King of the forest, I command you to never do anything to harm me or Abigail Hobbs." Hannibal nodded and Will carried on. "You will always come when called upon. Most importantly, our deal is off. You won't order, nor compel me to kill for you. You won't kill or contribute to the death of another being for as long as you are in my service."

That made Hannibal frown and Will felt like this was going to be the very first test of his authority.

"Unless I bid you do so." Hannibal's eyes were still hard, but he nodded to this too. "Tonight you'll stay here. You may choose your place of rest yourself."

"As you wish," Hannibal said and his gaze went aflame.

Will ran his fingers through the soft hair on the back of Hannibal's head. He tugged at it gently and then let go completely, knowing he'd made himself clear. As Will made his way towards the bedroom he could hear Hannibal follow him, and a pleased smile formed on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading ❤

For the ones reading this on mobile (so most of you, really) I apologize, if the emojis look a bit cheeky. They are a lot more aesthetically pleasing on pc 😉

After this chapter the rating will change to explicit

if you're interested in reading about myths about shapeshifting animal brides/grooms (how do I phrase this in a way that doesn't sound like bestiality), you can check this one out:
https://www.terriwindling.com/blog/2020/07/animal-brides-bridegrooms.html

This one is great too:
https://windling.typepad.com/blog/2013/08/swan-maidens-crane-wives.html

Mythology and folklore have by nature a lot of variation so if you know some elements differently, please don't hesitate to share. Still keep in mind that I am taking some creative liberties.

The Mushroom House

They say the morning is wiser than the evening and with good reason, but when Will woke up to Hannibal in his arms, he felt like the same fool he'd been the day before.

His whole life Will had been burdened by seeing everything. The hungry goblin under every bridge, the Poludnitsa on every harvest, the Bes on every drunkard's shoulder. As a child, Will had been constantly terrified of the world, but as the years had gone by he'd just become tired. He'd even stopped locking his door at night – whatever monster wanted to eat him was welcome to try.

Now, Will wasn't locking his door for a very different reason. What was the point of hanging garlic around your home, when you had the most powerful creature around sleeping in your bed every night? Not only that, Will could order Hannibal to do anything he wanted.

As he looked at the deity in his arms, Will wasn't scared by what he was seeing. He was in awe.

"Good morning to you too, Will." Hannibal finally mumbled, when Will started rubbing against him. "It's usually considered good etiquette to wait until after breakfast before indulging in other more pleasant activities."

Will flipped them so he was leaning over Hannibal. "Such moral excellency" He rasped and started kissing his way from behind Hannibal's ear and down his throat. "Are you sure you aren't a Christian?"

"I've been called many things, but this has to be the most vulgar one yet." Hannibal deadpanned and Will bit down at his collarbone.

"That's not quite true though, is it?" Will mused as he gave the bite several small licks. "Not if memory serves." The deity's breaths got shallow at the mere mention. For all, he claimed he "didn't abide rudeness" Hannibal sure liked a little dirty talk.

"You're bold for a human," The deity growled and flipped them over, so he was on top. "But even cowards may poke the bear when it's in chains."

"I've never met a bear, who liked to be poked as much as you do." Will shot back, running his hand over the tense muscles of Hannibal's arm. Then he sobered and said: "I command you to leave the moment you no longer want this."

Hannibal smiled with his eyes and Will could feel content radiating off him. Without another word, the deity made his way down Will's body. Soon Hannibal reached his objective and Will threaded his fingers through the man's hair and started dragging his nails gently over the scalp. Hannibal rewarded him with small kisses and licks that served the trick of getting Will fully aroused.

When the circle of warmth that was Hannibal's mouth enveloped him, Will had to bite down on his tongue to remain silent. When he'd built this cabin he hadn't planned for privacy.

"Hannibal, slow down." He pleaded when the man started moving his head up and down. Will could hardly be expected to control himself when he was this stimulated. It had always been like that between them, ever since that first night – rushed, hushed, always one step away from violence.

Will could barely breathe, and he had no idea how Hannibal was managing. The deity hadn't paused for breath once. When Will started to get close he tried matching Hannibal's movements with his hips, but the man held him down with such command that it brought Will over the edge.

When Hannibal finally emerged from under the blanket Will felt boneless. Then, as always the deity got dressed and walked out.

Will's eyes followed him silently. Hannibal never stayed after their moments of passion, never let Will return the favour.

After going about his morning business outside Will found Hannibal finishing up breakfast. Will set the plates on the table, but when he reached for the silverware it felt hot like it had been sitting over the fire. The fork fell from his hand.

Hannibal looked up from his cooking. When he noticed the fallen eating utensil he removed the pan from the fire and approached Will. The deity took Will's burnt hand in his own and examined it carefully.

After a second the pain subsided and the skin healed completely.

"Use this," Hannibal said, as he handed Will a wooden fork.

For a long moment, Will stared at it, then turned his eyes to Hannibal.

"Do you care to explain to me why I got burnt by a fork?" Will finally asked.

Hannibal's explanation came swiftly and without him having to pause stirring: "Because it's silver. Part of the wedding gifts your mother received, I suspect. It might have some minor hex on it to ward thieves off."

"I've been using this fork for as long as I can remember," Will argued.

"I don't know what to tell you, Will, maybe the fork sensed a malicious intent in you."

Before Will had a chance to respond, Abigail walked in, and so he let the conversation drop.

The meals weren't the same without meat, but Will simply didn't trust Hannibal not to find some handy loophole in his orders regarding what meat he was allowed to cook.

Still, people can get used to anything given enough time.

Abigail for example, appeared to be perfectly happy with her new family, though it consisted of the man who'd killed her father and an ancient forest deity. Still, mealtimes were usually polite and quiet.

"I'd like to go and help Hannibal at work today," Abigail announced, and it was obvious she'd been gathering the courage to do so. "If that's alright, of course." She quickly added, sneaking a look at Hannibal.

The deity smiled at her, his eyes wrinkling a little. "Your help would be welcome, Abigail, as long as your father doesn't mind."

Will almost dropped his fork for a second time that morning, but he recovered in time. "Of course not." He replied. "You'll learn a lot more with Hannibal than with me, teaching foul-mouth ten-year-olds the alphabet."

Abigail got a little smile on her lips and looked down as if a bit embarrassed not to be disagreeing. "I would like to start working." She added after a while. "I don't feel like I'm earning my keep."

"You don't have to, Abigail. I- We take care of you because we want to." Will assured her.

When Abigail looked at him with determination, Will realized that this newfound desire to be of use had less to do with him and Hannibal than with Abigail's need to feel in control again.

"What work would you like to do?" he asked.

"My only real skills are skinning animals and preserving their hides," Abigail answered, then her eyes widened, and she looked at Hannibal. "I'm so sorry, I-I didn't think."

Will went tense as well. They'd come so far only to end up here again.

"You can relax, Abigail, all has been forgiven a long time ago." Hannibal's voice was as soothing as Will had ever heard it. "Misha's hide has been burnt, and it's only a matter of time until she is reborn, and we are reunited again."

If he'd blinked, Will would have missed Hannibal looking at him, while saying the last part.

"Sir, I have a question." The miller's son spoke up some time after the grammar lesson. "Is it true you met the King of the Forest?"

If anything Will had expected to be asked that question the moment he'd entered the classroom.

“I did,” Will said sagely. “I’m guessing you would like to know how I escaped his clutches.”

That started an uproar among the few children in the classroom. “Yes! Yes, tell us!”

Will leaned back on his desk and crossed his arms over his chest. “I was in the forest one night. All I needed were a few sticks to stoke the fire. I tried to be as quiet as a mouse, but monsters always have the keenest of senses.”

The children were hanging on his every word. None dared to make a sound as if fearing that they themselves may alert the King of the Forest. It was too late for that, however. The deity was already leaning at the door frame, watching Will with curiosity.

“It was a moonless night, and so it was pitch black, but there was no way to miss its approach.” Will did his best to keep his eyes facing forward, but they were inevitably drawn to Hannibal. “It was giant. Its muzzle was as big as that of a bull. Its eyes were like two ambers glowing in the dark and its horns of steel reflected their red light.”

A few of the younger students were clutching at one another, but none wanted the story to end. Hannibal seemed intrigued as well.

“Then it opened its mouth, full of sharp teeth, and asked: ‘Why have you come to my forest, human?’. I wanted to run, but I knew my only chance of escape was to outwit the demon. ‘A long time ago you made a deal with my father that if you helped him marry my mother, he would give to you his firstborn child. I’ve come to repay his debt.’ I answered. ‘I don’t remember your father.”, the demon replied, “But if you say it is so, come with me.’”

Hannibal’s eyes had a dangerous spark to them and Will didn’t let himself consider what that meant.

“The monster took me to its layer. It was filthy, not cleaned in centuries.” That seemed to hit a nerve with the deity and Hannibal took a deep breath. “‘You have until dawn to wipe down every surface in this place until it shines. If you can’t manage that you are useless to me, and I’ll eat you for breakfast.’. The monster told me and then left.”

The children gasped. “And did you succeed?” they wanted to know.

Will smiled secretively. “A samodiva helped me.” He told them finally. “She was beautiful like the morning star, with long blond hair down to her hips. She cleaned the house with her magic and taught me how to trick the monster.” Hannibal’s face didn’t betray either surprise or anger.

“How did you do it?” Will’s pupils demanded, and so he continued: “When the monster came in the morning I presented it with its now clean home, and it looked pleased. ‘There’s only one surface I’m yet to clean.’ I told the demon. ‘Let me clean your horns as well, and they’ll shine like they were made of silver.’ The monster nodded and took off its iron horns. The moment it did, it became a man. When it handed them to me, I dashed out of his lair, and in its human form, the monster was too slow to chase me down.”

“Where did you hide the horns?” One of the older girls asked.

Will looked straight at Hannibal when he answered: “Where he would never find them.”

Afterwards, there was no use trying to get the overexcited students to learn anything, so Will ended class for the day.

One by one the children walked past Hannibal, greeted him politely and left. Then the good doctor walked in himself. “That was quite the tall tale.” The deity commented.

“I could hardly tell them the truth,” Will stated innocently.

“You’re not doing Bedelia any favours by flaunting her involvement in your little coup,” Hannibal said, crowding Will against the desk. “Though when it comes to her, it doesn’t make a difference one way or the other. She’s already signed her fate.”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure about that.” Will leaned back comfortably and casually placed his hand on the back of Hannibal’s neck. “You’ve been ordered not to harm another living being, while I’m your master. That includes Bedelia.”

“I guess will cross that bridge, when we get there,” Hannibal answered, but Will wasn’t ready to let the opportunity go.

“I thought elks were supposed to be familiars to the samodivi. Can Bedelia command you the way I do? Is that why you want her dead?” He inquired.

Hannibal shook his head. “Sometimes I forget, Will, just how short a life you’ve lived. Bedelia is no more my master than I am hers. But I trusted her, and she betrayed that trust, so she has to pay.”

Will let his hand drop from behind Hannibal’s neck. Sometimes having power over the forest deity felt like holding the reins to the night. What was the point of controlling a thing, when you couldn’t comprehend its nature?

“If you have no more classes for today, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine. She’s only in town for two days, and she must be waiting with Abigail in my cabinet as we speak.”

🍄

When they entered through Hannibal’s door, however, the woman speaking to Abigail was no stranger to Will.

“He is a dangerous and unstable man,” explained Freddie Lounds. “You shouldn’t be living with him or people would start to talk about you as well. If you want to I can-”

Will snatched the quill from the ginger’s hand. “She doesn’t want anything from you.” He grumbled, before snapping the green feather in two.

“That was a gift!” Freddie shrieked, her eyes going wide.

“And this is my home, so unless inviting you has slipped my mind, I’d like you to leave, Miss Lounds,” Hannibal said calmly.

For a while, the woman only stared at Hannibal, then she answered in a much more demure fashion: “I thought you were supposed to be a doctor. Or is this not your cabinet?”

Hannibal nodded politely. “Do you require any medical assistance, Miss Lounds?”

“No,” Freddie replied curtly, before gathering her things and turning to leave. Before she could, Will took the sheets of paper from her hands.

“I’m relieved you’re too old to have ever been my student. Are these letters or satanic symbols?” He asked while fleeting over the written text.

“I wouldn’t know, Graham, you’re the expert,” Freddie bit back. “You could probably ask your beloved master the King of the Forest.”

Before Will could even turn around, Freddie Lounds was gone. He looked carefully at Hannibal, but he was already occupied with Abigail. Will wondered if the deity had been able to sense whether Freddie had recognized him in this form.

As for himself, Will concluded that either the woman hadn’t seen Hannibal’s face, or she was fearless and particularly skilled at acting.

Hannibal’s ‘old friend’ arrived not long after. The moment the woman walked through the door Will realized she was a samodiva, just like Bedelia. Just like his mother.

“Hello, Alana. It’s good to see you after all these years.” Hannibal greeted her. He took the samodiva’s hand in his and placed a kiss on her knuckles. “How was your journey?”

When Hannibal didn’t immediately let go, something went taut inside Will. He tried looking away, but his eyes were fixed on the physical connection between the two powerful beings.

Hannibal’s voice snapped Will out of his trance. “Alana, let me introduce to you my dear friend, Will Graham and his adopted daughter Abigail Hobbs. Will, Abigail, this is Dr Alana Bloom, one of the most intelligent people you’ll ever meet.”

Will shook Alana’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr Bloom.”

The spark in Alana’s eyes spoke of her curiosity. “So you’re the man, who got the great King of the Forest. I must say I’m surprised. I always thought it would be either me or Bedelia.”

Will tried to smile at her, but his mood was still sour, so he didn’t force it.

“I’m sorry to say I’ve never heard of you before today.”

Alana chuckled at that. Her grip was strong and feeling her magic directly almost made Will stumble back. He wondered why Hannibal’s power had never felt this overwhelming to him, no matter how much they were touching.

When Alana reached Abigail, she didn't bother with a handshake, but rather embraced the girl in a hug. Abigail went tense then slowly relax in the samodiva's arms.

Now, this Will couldn't overlook, if he tried. How could this woman, this absolute stranger, dare to be this intimate with Abigail? For all Hannibal's 'your father this', 'your daughter that', Will had never let himself act so familial, and he probably never would. So seeing Abigail melt into Alana's hug hurt him more deeply than he could ever admit.

"I would kill her for you if you wish," Hannibal whispered in his ear.

Will didn't trust himself to be as quiet as Hannibal had been, so he simply shook his head 'no'.

Alana finally let go of their daughter, but still kept her hands on the side of Abigail's arms. "Abigail," Alana began. "I'm the personal physician of Lady Margot Verger. The two of us heard about the tragedy that befell you at such a young age, and so my Lady sent me to meet you. I'd like to speak to you about your future."

Without looking at the man, Will took hold of Hannibal's hand and squeezed it hard. Hannibal raised a brow at him, but Will shook his head repeatedly 'no'. 'Not yet.'

Before Will's composure had entirely evaporated, there was a knock at the door. Will let go of Hannibal's hand and the doctor went to see who it was.

It was apparently priest Crawford. "Good afternoon, Dr Lecter, Dr Bloom, Miss Hobbs. I'm afraid I must borrow Will if you wouldn't mind."

Will looked at Abigail again, but Jack shook his head. "It'd be best for Abigail to stay inside."

Will followed the bishop outside and was glad to see Hannibal did as well.

"Three bodies have been found buried in shallow graves near the edge of the woods," Jack announced and from the look on his face, Will knew he was about to witness something dreadful.

"Who is she? Will demanded when Jack was a good distance ahead of them.

"She's one of the samodivi, who use to lived in this forest. She fell in love with a visiting noble Lady and I helped the two of them deal with the Lady's older brother." Judging from Hannibal's expression Will could tell that was a good memory.

"Now the two live in a small castle and, I believe, have a young son, who'll inherit it, when he comes of age.

"If Lady Verger and Dr Bloom already have a child why have they taken an interest in Abigail?" Will asked bitterly.

That made Hannibal smile a little. “Given the family, the Lady comes from, I’d be surprised if she weren’t in the habit of rescuing unfortunate orphans. As for the doctor, her concern for Abigail may be sincere, but I suspect her coming all the way here has more to do with the recent development in our relationship.”

“So Alana travelled all this way just to see for herself if you like being tied up in bed?” Will chuckled, but the deity was not amused.

“I promise you that whatever Alana’s intentions are, I won’t let her take Abigail away from us.”

That made Will feel a little lighter and let him focus on catching up to the priest, who was at this point out of sight.

When they did catch up, Jack was standing next to his three most trusted helpers – Katz, Price and Zeller.

“Will, come and take a look.” priest Crawford commanded and Will stood over the three dug up graves.”

“How were they discovered?” He asked.

“A shepherd saw his sheep were gathering around something and went to investigate. He found three arms sticking above the ground, covered in fungus.”

Will crouched down to take a closer look. There were three corpses – a man, a woman and a young girl. Their whole bodies were covered with mushrooms of all shapes and colours.

“Has anyone recognized them yet?” Will inquired, staring at the disfigured faces.

“We suspect this on the left is Martin Baum, then Mary Baum and their daughter – Katya. They haven’t been seen for the last week or so.” Jack supplied.

“How can the fungus grew so much so quickly?” Will wondered aloud.

“I’m hoping you can tell us. What do you see, Will?” The bishop wanted to know.

Focusing on the victims, Will realized he could not only see but also smell them. “Do you smell it on them? It-it’s some kind of herb, herb concoction. Something they’ve been sedated with”

“I don’t smell anything.” Beverly Katz answered. “Are you saying they were poisoned?”

Hannibal crouched down next to Will. “Indeed, they were. Belladonnas I suspect, a serious dose of it. It’s probably still in their blood.”

“That explains how they died, but not why they are covered in mushrooms.” Zeller insisted.

“A leshy,” Will mumbled.

“What was that?” Jack asked.

“It was a leshy,” Will repeated. “They are extremely rare in these lands. I’ve only ever read of them. They are supposed to be these shape-shifting creatures that guard the forest against humans.”

The priest nodded and scratched the side of his face. “So how do we catch this leshy?”

“We follow the Belladonnas,” Will answered. When he started to get up something grabbed his leg. Will looked down and saw Katya Baum’s fungus-covered hand clutching at him for dear life. “They are alive!” Will shouted and everyone rushed forward to help.

The woodcutter’s family was brought to Hannibal’s cabinet in town. When he was sure all but Will Had left, the deity started healing the barely alive humans with his magic. Will assumed that Abigail had gone somewhere with Alana Bloom.

“Why do you think the leshy did it?” Hannibal asked while working.

Will looked at the Baum family and thought of how close together they’d been buried. “Martin was a woodcutter, he was harming the forest. The leshy wanted to make him connect with nature the way he was connected to his family.”

Hannibal didn’t answer, but Will sensed he was listening. “Martin Baum has lived in this area all his life. There’s no way he didn’t know that Belladonna berries are dangerous. The only way this much of it could have got into their bodies was, if they took a very concentrated dose, maybe even as medicine for insomnia.”

With that revelation, all clicked into place. “The only people that could have given it to them were the town doctor and the town apothecary, and I know you couldn’t have done it because you physically won’t be able to disobey my orders and harm anyone.”

Will had made sure of that very early on.

“I met the apothecary for the first time today,” Hannibal told him. “He was very interested in Abigail, particularly in her time helping her father during hunts.”

Will paled. “We need to find Abigail! Now!”

Louis Hobbs’s grave was in the church cemetery, but her husband hadn’t received a Christian burial. Rumour was he was buried near his old house in an unmarked grave.

It was no mystery with which one of her parents the leshy was planning to reunite Abigail.

Will and Hannibal reached the Hobbs' house at a breakneck pace, just in time to see a tall man carrying and laying an unconscious Abigail in the ground.

"Stop!" Will barked. "Stop it you, miserable piece of moss! Step away from her."

At first, when the leshy saw Will he looked prepared to fight, but when he noticed the King of the Forest beside the human all his confidence vanished.

"My King, I was only trying to help her see!" The creature moaned. "She's caused so much harm to the Forest! I saw her the day Your sister was killed. The girl lured her with sweet words and a crown of flowers, then her father took away the life of our young Princess. I only wanted to make her understand. Please, spare me!"

Instead of, listening to the leshy, Hannibal looked at Will. "He hurt our daughter. He is bargaining for his life now, and so he'll promise never to do it again, but if he's left alive, he'll strike at the first chance he gets," the deity stated with a deceiving calm. "Let me kill him."

Will thought about the Baum family slowly rotting away back in Hannibal's cabin. He thought of Nick Boyle, barely a man, young and impulsive, whose death and body had served to nourish Will's newly-formed family.

And finally, Will thought of Abigail almost dying, having her happiness, her future stolen from her, just so yet another monster could prove his point at her expense.

"Kill him," Will growled. "I command you to kill him and put him in the most barren, dry earth that you can find, where not even moss would grow."

Hannibal bowed down his head before Will, "As you wish, my Lord."

"You let a human order you around?!" The leshy seemed so repulsed, as to have forgotten to be afraid. That soon changed, however, as Hannibal pounced on him.

Will didn't watch what became of the leshy. He simply stood by Abigail's grave and held onto her propped up hand. Will sang her a lullaby he remembered his mother singing to him when he'd been but a child, even though he suspected his voice couldn't reach Abigail in her deep sleep.

The sun was starting to set when Hannibal came back.

"It's done." He told Will and the man nodded.

The deity didn't need an order to gently take Abigail out of the ground. For the second time at that same cursed place, Hannibal started chanting healing words, while he held their dying daughter in his arms.

Will laid his head on the deity's shoulder and breathed his scent. Hannibal smelt like a mixture of strong spices and the blooms of a lime tree. Will's entire body relaxed, when he took in the sent. It was so starkly different from the mixture of myrrh and frankincense that

filled the small town church during services. That smell had never put Will's mind at ease, it had always been a little too heady, a little too soft.

Hannibal's scent was rich and fulfilling. It was strong and familiar, and Will wondered why he'd never noticed it before.

They returned to their home after nightfall. Hannibal laid Abigail down on her bed before he joined Will in their bedroom.

“Thank you,” Will whispered, as they lay facing each other in the darkness.

“You have nothing to thank me for, mylimasis,” the deity answered.

Will wanted to ask what it meant. These gentle words, the tender touches and that look Hannibal had sent his way when he’d spoken of a reunion after rebirth.

But Will was exhausted and felt he might fall asleep before Hannibal could even answer, so he looked at the deity’s maroon eyes and placed a single soft kiss on his lips.

“Good night, Hannibal,” Will whispered and then gave in to sleep.

When Abigail woke up in the morning the two of them had to spend a long time at her side calming her down. Thanks to Hannibal’s magic Abigail was physically unharmed, but it was clear the horror of the abduction was still fresh in her mind.

When Will finished his retelling of the story, Abigail grabbed at him and to Will's utter shock - hugged him. At first, Will froze, afraid to move, afraid to do the wrong thing, but then he encircled Abigail with his arms and started stroking her hair gently.

He knew that Abigail was doing this more for Will's sake than hers. It stung to think that Abigail was exploiting his need for connection to manipulate him, but it was undeniable that their daughter was a fast learner and had a very good teacher in the face of her more divine father.

Their moment was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Bishop Crawford's expression was grim, when Hannibal let him in. "I heard you encountered the leshy," he stated in place of a greeting, looking directly at Abigail.

"Yes," Abigail confirmed and Will instinctively moved in front her to shield her from the priest's scrutinizing gaze.

"The leshy is dead," He informed Jack.

That took the man by surprise, but he recovered quickly and nodded. "That's good to hear, but it's not why I came. I need to speak to Miss Hobbs."

"May we ask what about?" Hannibal inquired and Will was glad to see him stepping in.

"I had my people searching for other victims of the leshy, but they found something else," The priest answered. "The body of Nicholas Boyle."

Will's pulse started beating in his ears, though he could not himself tell if it was anger or fear he was feeling. Jack had gone digging for the leshy's 'mushroom garden' and had instead stumbled right onto Will's.

The Big Bad Wolves

Will all but chased Jack out after the priest was done questioning Abigail. Sitting there, clutching at the door handle, Will realized that the noise he was hearing was his own growling.

He stopped immediately and turned to see if Hannibal or Abigail had noticed, but the two appeared engaged in a hushed conversation.

“I need to leave,” Will heard Abigail say. “Doctor Alana leaves tomorrow, I can go with her, stay with her and Lady Verger until he forgets about me.”

Will felt his growl rise again, but consciously suppressed it.

“No one is going anywhere,” he cut in.

“There’s no evidence against you Abigail. I’ll deal with Jack.”

“Will, I believe Abigail is right to be afraid for her safety,” Hannibal countered. “You of all people should know how quickly humans turn against those they perceive as sinful.”

Will felt a pang of betrayal at those words. What had happened to all Hannibal’s promises to keep their daughter out of Alana’s hands? At the same time, he knew the deity was speaking truth.

The last thing Will wanted was to put Abigail in harm’s way out of selfishness.

“Abigail, if leaving is what you truly want, I won’t stop you,” Will said finally.

The girl looked relieved. Yet again, she looked to Hannibal to observe his reaction. Will realized that for all he was Hannibal’s master, their daughter still saw Hannibal as her protector. It was Hannibal after all that had guided Abigail back into the realm of the living not once, but twice.

She had no veil, no antlers that Will could hide away, so he could keep her tethered to him. Abigail had already chosen which of her fathers her loyalty lay with.

“I don’t feel safe in this town any more,” she stated, and it almost sounded rehearsed. “I want to leave with doctor Bloom tomorrow.”

Although they were speaking to one another, both Will and Abigail’s eyes were on Hannibal. The deity nodded at the girl and Will caught the shadow of a proud smile on his lips.

“You’ll always have a home here,” Will told Abigail, tucking a piece of her auburn hair behind her ear.

“I know,” she said, trying to put on a smile. They both knew that she would never return. If Will ever wanted to see her he would need to uproot his life and follow her.

And maybe someday he would, but not yet.

Hannibal leaned in to hug Abigail. Although it was hushed the deity’s voice travelled to Will’s ears clear as a bell.

“Remember what we spoke about, Abigail,” Hannibal said. “And keep in Alana’s good graces.”

Abigail, as always, had that wide-eyed innocence plastered on her face, but for an instant, Will caught a grin flash on it.

Alana also said her goodbyes, but Will’s mind was already elsewhere.

After the carriage was out of sight, he turned his back to Hannibal and headed straight towards the church. It had become a sort of ritual for him to go behind the altar and make sure the antlers were still hidden there.

They were just where he’d left them and Will almost sighed in relief. He gave in to the impulse to stroke his thumb over them. After a while, he drew away a bit perplexed.

The antlers were sharp, sure, but usually just brushing against them was enough to break skin. Not today, though.

All kinds of thoughts started flooding Will’s mind. Were the antlers losing their power after so long away from the deity? And what of Hannibal, was his power going to start fading away as well? Maybe he would become a human, age.

Will could no more imagine Hannibal as an old man than he could himself. They weren’t meant to age as other men did. One because he was a god, the other because his very existence was too contradictory to be sustainable.

Maybe this was going to be just the thing to end him. If the antlers lost their powers, Hannibal’s tether would be broken. Then the deity would be free to kill Will and anyone else he pleased.

Not only that, first Will would have to fulfil his end of the deal they'd made the day Hannibal had saved Abigail’s life. He would have to kill.

“Will, is that you there?” Jack’s voice echoed through the empty church, and Will almost jumped out of his skin. He covered up the antlers and walked from behind the altar as calmly as he could.

“Hello, Jack,” he greeted, trying not to sound guilty. Then, seeing the distracted look on the priest’s face, he saw an opportunity to shift the focus away from himself. “Is everything alright?”

Jack ran a hand over his face. “Is it that obvious?”

Will nodded honestly. There was only one thing that could break Jack's mask of composure. "Is there something wrong with Bella?"

The priest's sat down at the first row and sighed deeply. "Bella has the lung, Will," Jack began. "She's had it for a while, but she hid it from me. Doctor Lecter has been treating her, but he's made it clear that it's more to make it easier on her until she…"

"Are you sure it was not the leshy poisoning her?" Will suggested. "I heard we have a new apothecary, maybe he can-"

Jack cut him off with a shake of his head. "I appreciate it, Will, but it's all in God's hands now. All we can do is pray."

Will had never been fond of prayers. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been sincere when going through the motions of worship. It was hard to be a good Christian with blood on your hands and a pagan god in your bed.

Thankfully that also meant Will didn't have to pray for divine help. He could command it.

Will hadn't planned to visit Hannibal that day, hadn't made any arrangements to do so. Still, he'd expected that when he arrived, he'd find the deity alone. He didn't.

There was a young man, about Will's age, standing there right next to Hannibal.

Will watched as the deity touched the man's face. "You'll do just fine, I believe in you," Hannibal spoke carefully and Will's blood boiled.

He cleared his throat and walked into the room without waiting to be invited.

The stranger turned around, his eyes sparkling with anger. "I don't believe we've met," he said challengingly not making any motion to step away from Hannibal.

"We haven't," Will bared his teeth in a smile. "Doctor Lecter, would you mind introducing us?"

The deity didn't look the least bit embarrassed by the situation. "Of course. Will, this is Randall Tier, the new apothecary. Randall, this is Will Graham, a dear friend of mine."

The two men stared at each other for a long while and Will was sure he saw Randall's nose twitch in what was the beginning of a snarl. He extended a hand to Will and Will gripped it hard. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Rudolph."

"Randall," the man snarled this time in earnest.

Will only let go of his hand when he'd got the measure of the other's strength. He certainly had a strong grip for an apothecary.

"Is there something you need, Will," Hannibal asked still perfectly unbothered.

‘I’d like to know why you let our daughter be taken away and why I now find you caressing a stranger,’ Will thought but swallowed back the words.

“I’m sure we can discuss it at dinner,” he replied, trying not to sneer.

The deity nodded. Will left, then before he could do something stupid like rub against Hannibal to make his claim as obvious as possible. From what he’d seen of the man Will gathered that Randall could understand just fine.

That night Will hadn’t gone straight home, however. He’d spent a good deal of time and money in the town tavern, trying and failing to get properly drunk. Will had never been a light-weight, but even after the seventh serving of whisky, he’d been unfortunately sober.

Then some travelling priest had started telling the story of a zmey, who’d occupied the only water source of a nearby village. No one, who’d met the beast had lived to tell, except one blind man. He’d come back to the village and delivered the zmey’s demands: he’d be given a woman clothed in sun, or he would not leave.

The town blacksmith had suggested they should just give the beast what it wanted, that if it were their town under siege, they had plenty of women to spare. Then Abigail’s name had come up. And Will had started throwing punches.

He didn’t remember most of it. All he knew was that at some point he’d been pulled off and thrown out of the tavern by what had felt like more than one pair of strong hands.

The red-hot anger that had clouded Will’s vision was now drifting apart towards the edges.

He walked towards his home guided almost completely by muscle memory. And there, with the light of the fire at his back stood Hannibal, waiting for him.

His shadow was tall and narrow, though now the antlers were gone.

Will walked briskly past him and into the cabin.

Hannibal caught his arm. “Let me see,” he asked, looking at Will’s battered face.

Will’s anger was slowly turning into bitterness. He couldn’t help wanting to open up to the deity. He was gently beckoned like a flower was by the sun, though Hannibal’s light was as cold and elusive as that of the moon.

Hannibal led him towards the fire. He inspected Will’s face and started chanting his healing spells while looking directly into Will’s eyes.

“I almost killed a man tonight,” Will whispered and the chanting ceased.

“Why?” Hannibal asked and Will gritted his teeth.

“He was speaking ill of Abigail,” he answered. “Said she was ‘born and bred to be bait for monsters.”

A muscle twitched on Hannibal’s face and his posture changed subtly. Will noticed all this, but knew not to interpret it as indignation on Abigail’s behalf. “And you disagree?”

“Abigail is no bait for monsters. She’s not Little Red riding hood, she’s the poor old grandma, asking you to come closer, so she could take a better look at you.”

Hannibal seemed amused by the idea. “So in your tale is Abigail the wolf herself, or the grandma, calling out of the belly of the beast?"

Will unconsciously leaned towards the fire. He was feeling cold. Had he forgotten his coat at the tavern?

“She didn’t desire the suffering of others,” He explained distractedly, drifting away from the conversation. “She didn’t want them to be eaten, but she was lonely. She wanted someone else there with her and that served the wolf just fine.”

Then Will swayed on his feet and Hannibal caught him before he fell.

When he got his feet back under him, Will pushed Hannibal away. Voicing his true thoughts about Abigail had left a bad taste in his mouth and he didn’t feel like being touched. He walked himself to the dinner table and sat down.

“The man whom you attacked, do you know him well?” Hannibal asked, once Will had dug into his sadly meatless dinner. As always it tasted divine and Will wondered what it was Hannibal was putting in it.

“It was the blacksmith. I don’t remember if I’ve ever even talked to him. It didn’t matter. At that moment he could have been anyone. I was so angry, I could barely think.”

“If you’ve come to terms with Abigail’s nature, why did the mention of it trigger such a violent reaction? Was it the threat to her safety?”

Will’s jaw tightened. His focus was returning, and he could see clearly what direction Hannibal was stirring their conversation in.

“No. I was already angry. I was worried that if I came here without letting out some steam I might do something I would regret.” Will tried to keep his voice calm. He wondered how Hannibal always managed it — if his divinity numbed emotions like anger or if he was just that good at maintaining the façade.

The deity sounded almost coy when he asked: “I think it’s safe to say then that it was me you were angry with. So tell me, Will, how have I displeased you?”

Will’s temper was threatening to rise again, but he chose to play along.

“I want to know why you let Abigail go with Alana. And don’t tell me that it was to keep her away from Jack. We both know that he is distracted now because of Bella’s sickness, he

wouldn't have acted decisively."

Hannibal considered carefully before he answered. "I'm going, to be honest with you, I let Abigail go to keep her safe. Perhaps not from Jack, but the point still stands."

"What does that mean?" Will wanted to know.

"You said you didn't want to come back here straight away, because you were worried you might have done something you would have regretted. What would you have done, Will? Come home, foaming at the mouth like some mindless beast? You said yourself that it didn't matter who was in front of you. What if Abigail had been home? Would you have attacked her as well?"

"Don't." Will gritted through his teeth. "Don't use her against me. You know I wouldn't have. I would never hurt Abigail!"

"And what about me?" Hannibal inquired. "Would you hurt me, Will?"

Will let the question hang between them. Since the night they'd met Hannibal had held power over him. The deity had pulled dangerously close to the surface a part of Will that he'd always feared. A part that sometimes felt a closer kinship with the monsters he hunted than the people he was meant to be protecting.

But now things were different. Now, Will was the one that held power over Hannibal. He could compel him to do anything. He'd also made the deity harmless by taking away his ability to hurt anyone, Will and Abigail especially.

What kind of monster would he be if with all this power in his hands he chose to hurt Hannibal?

"I would not. Not for as long as you are in my service, you have my word." Will finally replied, holding Hannibal's gaze, pinning him with his eyes. "But I wasn't talking about hurting you. That wasn't what I was worried I might do."

A spark of mischief flashed in Hannibal's eyes, "Then what was it?

Before he answered Will wiped the corners of his mouth with the linen handkerchief Hannibal always left by his plate. "Today, in your office, you looked quite taken with our new apothecary."

"Randall used to be a patient of mine some years ago," Hannibal explained perfectly poised. "I had invited him to visit some time ago and it just so happened that, when he arrived there was a suitable position for him to take over."

"A patient of yours? What condition did he suffer from, inability to respect personal space?"

Hannibal's smile was there and gone before Will could even fully take note of it.

"Randall's condition is a matter between a doctor and a patient. All you need to know is that there was nothing physically wrong with him and so helping him required an unconventional

treatment."

Hannibal got up then and poured himself a glass of wine. He silently offered Will some, but Will shook his head. He'd had enough for one night, even if it hadn't got him drunk.

"I'm sure you'll find that the two of you have a lot in common," said Hannibal as he swirled the wine in his glass. Will watched with maybe a little too much interest as the deity took in the aroma of the wine before bringing it up to his perfect bow-shaped lips.

"We certainly share a taste in physicians," Will threw back, tearing his eyes away from Hannibal's mouth. It hadn't gone unnoticed, however, judging by the crinkles of amusement around the deity's eyes.

"I assure you, Will, Randall has never been more than a patient to me. You are the only lover I've taken in a very long time."

Hannibal's eyes were warm, his posture relaxed and inviting. He continued to enjoy his wine and watch Will with a thinly-veiled interest. There was something else there too, a kind of regard Will couldn't have possibly earned in the short few months they'd known each other.

He'd seen this look only once before.

"The night I sleepwalked into the forest you told me you've waited a long time for me. What makes me so special? Is it my ability to see your true form? But no, that can't be it, not when our friend Freddie Lounds has proven anyone with enough magical blood can manage that."

Hannibal smiled into his wine. "You're right, Will, that's not it," he confirmed. Will had half a mind to compel him if the deity didn't elaborate. "It's not one single aspect that interests me. It's your whole being."

Will considered that then got up and slowly circled the table. "Is that so? You don't find it demeaning to be bound to a lowly human? Do you not fantasize about getting your antlers back and piercing me through with them?"

Will's mother had told him once that she'd imagined herself doing a similar thing to his father. Why she hadn't gone through with it Will didn't know. Maybe it'd been for Will's sake, maybe there was some other aspect of his parents' strained marriage that he didn't know of.

"You are no mere human, Will," Hannibal answered and Will took a step closer towards him. "And even if you'd been born one, that wouldn't have lessened your potential to grow into your true self."

"You're avoiding the question," Will insisted. "Do you find it demeaning that I hold power over you? When I ordered you to kill the leshy you called me 'my Lord' and then 'mylimasis'. What does that mean?"

"I do not find it demeaning," the deity finally answered directly. "Have you heard the story of Achilles and Patroclus, Will?"

“I am a teacher, Hannibal, I’ve read the Iliad,” Will answered a bit defensively.

Hannibal nodded. “Achilles’ mother was a goddess, and he’d witnessed how quickly she’d left his human father the moment her one-year duty as a wife was fulfilled. The last thing he would have wanted was to spend his life with someone who obeyed him out of duty. Achilles was a demigod, Patroclus was human, yet they lived as equals. Not only that, Plato philosophized Achilles was the one that let Patroclus dominate him.”

Those words alighted a bonfire inside Will. Hannibal was still comfortably sitting in his chair, while Will stood there trying not to pounce on him. He couldn’t let that be.

“Stand up,” Will commanded. The deity’s eyebrow quirked up, but he did obey. “Tell me honestly is that how you see me? As an equal?”

“Yes,” Hannibal confirmed without hesitation. “You are my equal and opposite in many ways, Will, except in those, in which we’re the same.”

Will placed his hand on Hannibal’s midsection and pushed his jacket away, so he could encircle the deity’s waist.

“And ‘in your tale’,” Will began, imitating Hannibal’s accent. “Are you Achilles or Patroclus?”

Hannibal leaned in against Will and ran a feather-light touch down his body. “I’d be perfectly content with either part, mylimasis.”

A rare smile rose to Will’s lips. He caught Hannibal’s hand before it travelled past his belt and looked directly into the deity’s eyes.

“My order still stands. The moment you no longer want this you *will* let me know, and I’ll stop, I promise you,” Will said firmly.

It didn’t escape Will that he had the absolute certainty that the deity wouldn’t be able to hurt him, yet all Hannibal had was Will’s word. He reminded himself that even captured Hannibal was still a pagan god, who was not above murdering humans. For now, if they were to be equals Will had to be in control.

Maybe someday he could grow to trust the deity enough to set him free. Maybe someday, but not yet.

“I know you will,” Hannibal stated simply and leaned in, sealing their lips together.

The deity’s lips were sweet with the wine and tasting them Will found them more intoxicating than any drink in the world. He clung to Hannibal, ran his hand up and down the deitz's sides over his shirt and when that didn’t prove satisfying enough, started tearing at the cloth.

As the kisses grew more passionate, Will’s knees threatened to give in, and he put a hand on Hannibal’s chest to steady himself. Slowly his whole body began to grow weak until finally it went completely slack.

Hannibal caught Will in his arms. In his last moments of consciousness Will heard the deity say: “Good night, Will, sleep well.”

Will woke up to the feel of cold water. He immediately took a defensive position thinking, he was being attacked. When his eyes focused and his mind cleared, he realized two things: he was in the woods, lying on the banks of the Eye of the forest; he was naked as the day he’d been born.

“I apologize for the unpleasant wake-up, but it’s really not time for you to be lying around, basking in the sun,” a woman’s voiced said. It took Will a moment to realize it was Bedelia, the Queen of the forest.

He tried covering himself, but seeing the samodiva’s unimpressed look, gave up the effort. “What am I doing here,” he asked.

Bedelia answered his question with one of her own: “Do you recall anything from last night? Anything at all?”

Will tried to think, “I was at home, I had dinner with Hannibal, we… kissed and then… then everything went dark. No, not dark. It went red. As if I was slipping under the surface of this endless river of-.”

Will looked at his reflection in the lake. There was dried blood all over his face.

“You need to remain calm,” The samodiva told him, but Will didn't know if he could. His heart was racing, his chest was heaving, and he couldn’t stop looking at his cursed reflection.

He threw himself on his knees and started frantically swooping water from the lake and trying to rub the blood off. Then he realized there was blood on his hands as well, and he started scratching at them, trying to get rid of it, but it didn’t seem to work.

He only stopped, once a cool hand was laid on his back. Bedelia took his hand and submerged it in the lake. She started speaking in a language that sounded a lot like the one Hannibal spoke, when he was casting spells, but was somehow more lilted and gentle sounding.

“Why are you helping me?” Will asked weakly, staring at the samodiva.

Bedelia was silent for a while, then she spoke: “Better me than him. I won’t let him do to you the same he did to me.”

“Are you talking about Hannibal?” Will asked and the samodiva nodded reluctantly.

“How old are you?” She inquired and if he didn’t know better Will would have thought she was making small talk.

“Twenty-six,” Will responded, his annoyance rising. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Twenty-six years ago, then. That sounds about right, though time passes differently for us- for me,” Bedelia explained calmly, starting on cleaning Will’s face with certain and impassive touches. “That’s when the humans started hunting us, started stealing our veils.”

Too many questions gathered in Will’s mind. Before he could ask any, the Queen of the forest continued: “When a human came after me, I killed him. Pure luck, I thought, he’d started choking on his tongue, and I’d just helped it go down. I was relieved, of course, but also disgusted and in shock. I came to this same lake, tried getting myself clean. He helped me. I hadn’t known before then that he could turn into a human. I didn't care, though, as long as there was someone to take over, once I couldn’t think any more. That day I accepted Hannibal as my familiar. A grave mistake as I’ve since come to realize.”

“That’s fascinating, Bedelia, but I don’t need you to ‘take over’ for me,” Will said and drew away. “I don’t need you to comfort me and hold my hand, I want you to tell me what I did last night and why I am covered in blood that I am sure isn’t my own.”

“Very well,” The samodiva’s expression grew dark. “I thought I’d break it down to you gently, but you seem to lack the attention span, so I’ll speak plainly: you are cursed. When the sun started rising you stumbled your way through the forest and collapsed on this very spot. Before the first rays of light hit you, you looked very differently to how you do now. You were a wolf.”

Will was rendered absolutely speechless. He tried to comprehend Bedelia’s words, but didn’t know where to begin. “Why should I believe you?” He asked standing up. He couldn’t even find it in himself to be ashamed of his nakedness.

The Queen of the forest also got up, graceful as a swan. She didn’t look offended, but rather deadly serious. “You shouldn’t, but let me tell you this: Neither should you trust Hannibal. You might think you’ve collared him, but don’t underestimate him, lest you should regret it.”

Will kicked the door to Hannibal’s cabinet open and barged right in. Hannibal was there, thankfully, but for the second time in so many days so was Freddie Lounds.

“Looking well, Graham,” she said mockingly, but Will noticed that she herself was pale as the dead.

“Leave,” Will told her coldly and turned his eyes to Hannibal. Freddie heeded his words and the door slammed behind her.

The moment they were alone Hannibal took a step forward. “Will, what happened to you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Will laughed almost hysterically. “A ghost? A ghost. No, Hannibal, I didn’t see a ghost, I saw a dead body. The blacksmith’s to be precise. I saw the blacksmith’s torn up, half-eaten body. And I-” Will felt the bile rise in his throat again.

Hannibal walked up to him and started rubbing his back until the urge passed. Will heaved in a breath and tried focusing on remaining in the moment, tried blocking out the terrible image of the man's scattered remains that Jack had taken him to.

"What happened last night?" Will demanded. "Why did I lose consciousness? Why did I wake up naked in the forest? Why is the man half the town saw me beat to a pulp now dead!"

Hannibal said nothing and Will started shaking with rage.

"ANSWER ME!" He shouted and Hannibal let go of him. The loss of contact made Will's confidence crumble in on itself. "Did I kill him, I need you to tell me."

"No, Will, you didn't," Hannibal replied and his hand was once again on Will's shoulder.

That was the last straw for Will, and he broke down, "Please don't lie to me," he pleaded weakly.

Hannibal led Will to a chair and sat across him. "Will, listen to me, what happened to that man was not your fault. You had no control over what you did last night. Tell me, what do you know about vukodlaks?"

When Will walked out of Hannibal's cabinet, he almost ran straight into Randall Tier. The apothecary looked even angrier than he had the day before, and he had a scarlet red scar running along one of his cheeks.

"You again," Randall growled as he looked Will up and down. "What he sees in you, I'll never know."

He tried shouldering his way past Will, but Will stopped him with a hard grip of his arm. Wordlessly, he stared at Randall until it all started sinking into place. "So that's how it is," he whispered to himself.

Through the open door Will looked back at Hannibal one last time. "I'll see you at dinner," he said and letting go of Randall, stepped outside.

Will had been prepared long before the sun started to set. It was no surprise to him, when Winston started barking at the window. He locked his dog in the bedroom and returned to the kitchen.

Will had latched the windows shut, but that did little to stop the massive creature that started hurling itself against them. After the third hit, Will knew that the rusted old hinges would fail, and so he loaded his arrow.

When the wolf broke through the window, Will released the shot right between the creature's eyes. It reared back, howling in pain, but recovered quickly and threw itself towards Will once again.

Moments before the wolf's jaws reached him, Will pulled the silver fork out of his pocket and stabbed the vukodlak right in the neck. He twisted the fork and when the creature collapsed, let go of it.

Will looked at his own burnt hand, then down at the body that was slowly morphing into a more familiar form.

Will wrapped his hand in cloth and pulled the silver fork out of Randall Tier's neck, then lifted the body and laid it out on the table.

Hannibal came home about an hour later. He spared Randall a quick look, then turned to Will with smiling eyes.

"Welcome home," Will greeted him coldly. "I think that now that all cards are on the table, we can finally begin talking. You know, as equals."

Hannibal's smile twisted Will's gut. He waited patiently for the deity to step into the room.

The fire illuminated Hannibal's form and Will watched the tall, narrow shadow it threw on the wall. It was crowned by a pair of sharp antlers.

The deity saw him looking and appeared pleased.

Will stared into his eyes, as he said: "Before we begin, however, you should first take your punishment."

That seemed to catch Hannibal off guard, but he seemed curious more than angry.

"First, you sent our daughter away to clear the stage. Then you lied to me, manipulated me and finally put my life in danger. You must be disciplined."

Hannibal's eyes were burning like the night after Will'd stolen his antlers. Will took a step closer to him and spoke with a voice made of steel: "Kneel."

And though he no longer had to obey Will, Hannibal did.

End Notes

Thank you for reading *Ü*!

May I humbly suggest you also check the playlist I made to go along with this story:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/46uT3hh6aDFbKC0pLYSCrq

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!